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CHRIS LAFFAILLE—JB PICTURES

Bringing in supplies: When the agency pulled the plug, even the rice and beans ran out

CENTRAL AMERICA

The CIA Blows an Asset

American pressure on Comandante Zero backfires.

There was a time when the CIA thought Edén Pastora Gómez could be a useful tool. In Nicaragua he was a Sandinista folk hero, the legendary "Comandante Zero." And when he fell out with The Revolution, The Company came calling. By last December, his threadbare guerrilla organization, the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE), was stinging the Nicaraguan interior as far north as Rama and the port city of Bluefields. But when Pastora resisted CIA blandishments to merge with right-wing anti-Sandinistas, the agency tried to change his mind by throttling back its support. The pressure backfired, bringing instead a disastrous run of military defeats and debilitat-

ing factional disputes. Pastora received a final humiliation last week when Costa Rican officials cut off his phone: Comandante Zero couldn't even pay his bill.



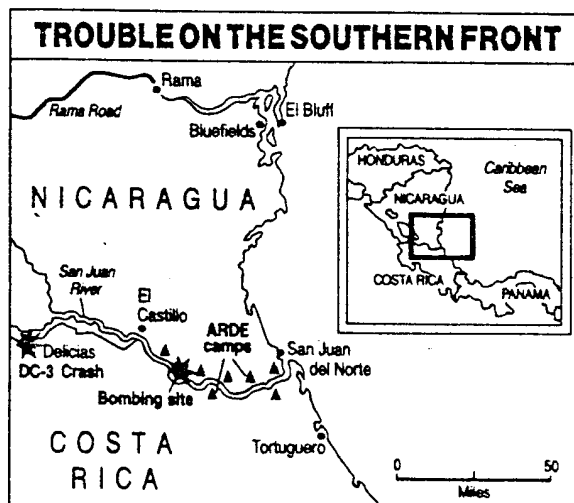
CHRIS STEELE PERKINS—MAGNUM

Edén Pastora

The CIA declines to make any official comment on the affair, but it is clear that its covert war on Nicaragua's "southern front" is all but over. "ARDE was defeated because it was mismanaged," concludes an American who witnessed the fighting. "They had airplanes, 150 different vehicles, but none of this got to the fighters at the front." Others blame the defeat on Pastora's ego; he is a

mercurial, stubborn and highly independent leftist. But some ARDE supporters insist that the fault lies with the CIA. "Their position is clear," says Edén's cousin, Orión Pastora. "If you don't do as you are told, then there is no space for you."

In the past, ARDE leaders had denied receiving any covert U.S. support. But NEWSWEEK has learned that the CIA began supplying ARDE with arms in July 1983, when a shipment of 500 Russian-made AK-47 assault rifles was sent from Israel to Venezuela and delivered to Pastora's troops at Tortuguero, a Costa Rican fishing lodge near the Nicaraguan border. The shipments continued through early 1984 as U.S. arms, ammunition and equipment arrived spo-



MARTIN NORMAN—NEWSWEEK

INTERNATIONAL

radically on clandestine flights from Panama and El Salvador. Another measure of the relationship between ARDE and the Reagan administration was a secret meeting last September between Pastora and U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica Curtin Winsor Jr.

The CIA may have been assisted by a group of wealthy Americans who own farming operations in the remote jungle along the San Juan River. Some of them have permitted their private airstrips to be used by ARDE planes and have, by their own accounts, given "other assistance" to the rebels. "I give ARDE moral support more than anything else," says California native Bruce Jones. "Let me put it this way. Anything I can do for them I will." At least some of the supplies are believed to have been airdropped at a border ranch owned by John Hull, Jones's business partner; Costa Rican officials suspect Hull of recruiting mercenaries and storing and trafficking supplies for ARDE—a charge supported by at least one American mercenary who served with Pastora at the time. Hull denies any such involvement. Still, in a yet-unexplained incident last March 23, an unmarked DC-3 slammed into a mountainside near Hull's ranch, scattering ammunition around the area. According to local residents and Costa Rican investigators, a group of unidentified men soon arrived at the crash site and burned the bodies of the crew.

Supplies: By December 1983, says one American who spent time with Pastora, ARDE had possibly 2,500 guerrillas deployed in the Nicaraguan interior and along the San Juan River from El Castillo to just short of the Caribbean coast. They had practically no food, weapons or medical supplies. ARDE commanders had long been planning an attack on the village of San Juan del Norte, where a Nicaraguan garrison guarded the entrance to the river. With control of the river's mouth, ARDE would have been able to receive supplies by sea—without violating Costa Rica's neutrality.

Simultaneously, however, the CIA was pressing ARDE to unite with the right-wing Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN). Pastora had long claimed that the northern rebels were infested with former allies of the late Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza—the kind of men Pastora believes killed his father. In December the FDN restructured its military command to remove the influence of several of Somoza's National Guardsmen. As a result, says one source in Washington, Pastora "pledged his willingness to work with the FDN operationally," and additional CIA supplies began pouring in.

During the week of April 9,